Annual Meeting, Evangelical Theological Society, 2010
Dr. Michael S. Heiser, Logos Bible Software; mheiser@logos.com
www.thedivinecouncil.com; www.twopowersinheaven.com; www.nakedbibleblog.com

**Should the Plural אלהים of Psalm 82**

**Be Understood as Men or Divine Beings?**

## 1. *Introduction*

Psalm 82 has long been a nuisance for Jewish and Christian interpreters. As Morgenstern noted in his lengthy study of the psalm, "Although its text is in almost perfect condition and better far than the text of the vast majority of the Psalms, scarcely any psalm seems to have troubled interpreters more or to have experienced a wider range of interpretation and a more disturbing uncertainty and lack of finality than Psalm 82."[1] Morgenstern is correct, but as I will suggest in this paper, the reason for the confusion stems from several defects in our own thinking and methods, not the clarity of the text. For the ancient orthodox Israelite, there was no conundrum.

To begin, the very first verse assaults our theological sensitivities:

אֱלֹהִים נִצָּב בַּעֲדַת־אֵל בְּקֶרֶב אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט׃

God (אלהים) stands in the divine assembly; in the midst of the gods (אלהים) he passes judgment.

The first occurrence of אלהים is correctly translated "God" obviously to be taken as singular for reasons of grammatical subject-verb agreement (נִצָּב). The second אלהים is equally obvious as a plural since it is the object of the preposition (בְּקֶרֶב). One cannot be in the midst of one (and for anyone thinking of the Trinity here, as we will see, that presumption in this verse leads to heretical theology no one in this room would embrace). The grammar and syntax are crystal clear. The God of Israel is, in Psalm 82, presiding over a group—a council (עֲדַת)—of אלהים. The plurality point is also echoed in verses 6-7 where the אלהים suffer the loss of their immortality:

[1] J. Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," *HUCA* 14 (1939): 29.

6 אֲֽנִי־אָ֭מַרְתִּי אֱלֹהִ֣ים אַתֶּ֑ם וּבְנֵ֖י עֶלְי֣וֹן כֻּלְּכֶֽם׃
7 אָ֭כֵן כְּאָדָ֣ם תְּמוּת֑וּן וּכְאַחַ֖ד הַשָּׂרִ֣ים תִּפֹּֽלוּ׃

I said, 'You are gods (אלהים), even sons of the Most High (בני עליון), all of you;
nevertheless, like humans you will die, and fall like any prince.'

But how can this be? How could the psalmist tolerate the existence of multiple אלהים within the context of Israelite monotheism? How can the Hebrew Bible affirm plural אלהים in this psalm and yet deny that there are other gods in other passages? To cut to the chase, the first question is misguided—having many אלהים does nothing to undermine an orthodox Israelite view of Yahweh. The second question derives from an erroneous assumption—that the existence of other אלהים is denied in the Hebrew Bible. But both questions telegraph clearly why so many Jewish and Christian (evangelical) interpreters argue that the plural אלהים of Psalm 82 are humans. Seeing these אלהים as divine beings is viewed as a threat to monotheism, the heart of biblical theology. Making them human is the easiest path to removing the problem. But is it correct? My answer is "No." In this paper, I hope to show why arguing that these אלהים are human beings is completely incoherent and, more importantly, completely unnecessary for defending a monotheistic biblical theology. Toward that end, I will address how an Israelite would have understood the term אלהים, thereby providing a corrective to our own mistaken understanding. This will help us see that plural אלהים are no threat to monotheism. I'll then provide a positive defense that the plural אלהים in Psalm 82 are divine beings by highlighting some transparent details from the text why the plural אלהים in Psalm 82 cannot be humans. Lastly, I'll take a negative approach, demonstrating that there is no coherent argument in favor of the human identification.

## 2. *The Meaning of* אלהים

### 2.1. The Variety of אלהים

Anyone who works in the Hebrew text and not English translations of the Old Testament will; readily detect that there are actually five different entities referenced as אלהים in the Hebrew Bible.

A. Yahweh, the God of Israel (over 2000 times)
B. The אלהים of Yahweh's heavenly council, both loyal and disloyal (Psa 82; Psa 89; cf. Deut 32:8-9, 43; Psa 58:11[2])
C. The gods of foreign nations (e.g., 1 Kings 11:33)
D. Demons (Deut 32:17[3])
E. The disembodied human dead (1 Sam 28:13)
F. Angels (Gen 35:7 – cf. the context of the plural predicator with אלהים subject[4])

This fact alone should immediately and unambiguously tell us that the word אלהים ought *not* be identified with one particular set of attributes. ***That*** is our fundamental mistake. We are accustomed to equating the word spelled g-o-d with the God of Israel and his unique attributes. As a result, the idea that other gods are indeed real—even if that is what the biblical text says—has been something to escape or obscure.

But the Hebrew text should not be translated or exegeted so that it conforms to our theological expectations or needs. Yet that is precisely what many translators and scholars do in Psalm 82 in the name of fidelity to true God. We ought to know intuitively that the biblical writers would not equate Yahweh in an ontological or qualitative sense with demons, angels, the human disembodied dead, the gods of the nations, or subservient members of Yahweh's own council. אלהים as a term does not refer to a set of attributes or ontology. Those issues are not explicated by a term; they are described in the Hebrew Bible. So what does אלהים mean then?

## 2.2. What אלהים Denotes

All the figures called אלהים in the Hebrew Bible have one thing in common: they all inhabit the non-human realm. That is, they are by nature not part of the world of humankind, a world of necessary embodiment. אלהים is what I call a "place of residence" term. It identifies the proper domain of the entity described by it. It labels the entity in terms of its residence, if you will. Yahweh, the lesser gods,

---

[2] There is a text-critical issue with this instance. For text-critical reasons, as well as reasons of literary parallelism, MT consonantal אלם should be vocalized אֵלִם or emended to אֵלִים. See Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word, 2002) 82; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II:51-100* (AB 16; New York: Doubleday, 1968) 57; M. Heiser, "Should אלהים (*ʾĕlōhîm*) with Plural Predication Be Translated 'Gods'?" *Bible Translator* 61:3 (July 2010): 135-136.

[3] See M. Heiser. "Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?" Bible Translator 59:3 (July 2008): 137-145.

[4] See M. Heiser, "Should אלהים (*ʾĕlōhîm*) with Plural Predication Be Translated 'Gods'?" *Bible Translator* 61:3 (July 2010): 135-136; cf. Dr. Heiser's other 2010 ETS paper, "What is/are (an) elohim?" available from Dr. Heiser.

angels, demons, and the disembodied dead are all rightful inhabitants of the spiritual (i.e., non-human) world. They may be able to cross over to our world, as Scripture tells us, and certain humans may be transported to their realm (prophets; Enoch), but their proper domain and our proper domain are two separate places. ***Within*** the spiritual world there is ontological differentiation, rank, and power: Yahweh is an אלהים, but no other אלהים is Yahweh. That was what an orthodox Israelite believed about Yahweh. He was not one among equals; he was species unique. Our modern term ($17^{th}$ century) "monotheism" is deficient for describing this, since it carries the mental baggage of identifying "g-o-d" with a single set of attributes held only by Yahweh. However, the thought behind the term—that Yahweh is utterly and eternally unique—remains completely intact. Our translations and our theology ought to make this clear. We have nothing to fear from letting the text say what it says.

## 3. Positively: Why the אלהים of Psalm 82:1 are Divine Beings

The plural אלהים of Psalm 82:1 are called "sons of the Most High" in verse 6. We of course know that for the Israelite, the Most High is Yahweh. Psalm 83:19 makes that equation explicitly. Elsewhere the "sons of God" are very obviously divine beings (e.g., Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7-8). However, there is one passage, Hosea 1:10, that uses a similar phrase of humans ("sons of the living God"), and Israelites on occasion were referred to as Yahweh's "son" (Exo 4:22-23). How can we be sure that divine beings are in view in Psalm 82?

### 3.1. Psalm 82 Should Not Be Isolated

If Psalm 82, with its plural אלהים in a council, were considered in isolation, we would be confronted with ambiguity. That is not the case, though. We ought to interpret Scripture with Scripture. We can be sure that Psalm 82 is not describing Yahweh presiding over a council or group of human judges for several reasons readily discerned from the Hebrew Bible.

Rather than isolate Psalm 82, we need to ask whether there are any other passages that feature the same language of divine plurality in a council found in Psalm 82 that rules out an equation of that language with human beings. Fortunately, there is such a passage. Psalm 89:5-7 eliminates any ambiguity with respect to the language in question.

> 5 Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
> your faithfulness in the assembly (קהל) of the holy ones!
> 6 For who in the clouds (בשׁחק) can be compared to the LORD?
> Who among the sons of God/the gods (בני אלים) is like the LORD,

7 a God greatly to be feared in the council (סוד) of the holy ones,
and awesome above all who are around him?

Psalm 89 rules out the notion that Yahweh's council of אלהים sons of God refers to an assembly of humans because it explicitly places that council "in the clouds." There is no text in the entirety of the Hebrew Bible that says or suggests that there are a group of human judges in the heavens ruling with Yahweh over the nations. That position is offered only because of a perceived threat to monotheism, not because it has any textual merit.

## 3.2. Deuteronomy as a Backdrop to Psalm 82

The fact that Psalm 82 has the council אלהים being judged for their corrupt administration also rules out humans (not to mention the Trinity). This is clear when ones asks what the council אלהים were supposed to be administrating. The answer is found in the last verse of the psalm, where the psalmist implores the God of Israel to rise up and "inherit" all the nations. The lemma behind "inherit" (נחל) provides the context for the judgment of the psalm. This is precisely the same lemma used to describe Yahweh's punitive judgment of the nations at the tower of Babel, when Yahweh allotted the nations to the sons of God, and allotted those same divine beings to the nations that he was disinheriting. The key passages are Deut 32:8-9 and its parallel, Deut 4:19-20:

> Deut 32:8 When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance (*Hiphil*, נחל), when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God [בני האלהים].[5] 9 But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage (נחלה).

> Deut 4:19 Lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, whom the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole

[5] Textual critics of the Hebrew Bible are unanimous in agreement that the Qumran reading (in brackets) is superior to the Masoretic text in Deut 32:8, which reads בני ישׂראל ("sons of Israel"). See for example, M. Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God," *BibSac* 158 (Jan-March, 2001) 52-74; P. W. Skehan, "A Fragment of the 'Song of Moses' (Deut 32) from Qumran," *BASOR* 136 (1954) 12-15; idem, "Qumran and the Present State of Old Testament Text Studies: The Masoretic Text," *JBL* 78 (1959) 21; Julie Duncan, "A Critical Edition of Deuteronomy Manuscripts from Qumran, Cave IV. 4QDt $^{b}$, 4QDt $^{e}$, 4QDt $^{h}$, 4QDt $^{j}$, 4QDt $^{b}$, 4QDt $^{k}$, 4QDt$^{l}$," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989); Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 269; Eugene Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4.IX: Deuteronomy to Kings* (DJD XIV; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 75-79; Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 156; J. Tigay, *Deuteronomy, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 514-518.

> heaven. 20 But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance (נחלה), as you are this day.

Both of these passages assume the reality of other אלהים.[6] If we begin at Deut 4:19-20 and then work toward chapter 32, we find that the "host of heaven" is identified as "other gods" (אֱלֹהִ֣ים אֲחֵרִ֔ים) worshipped by Israelites in defiance of Deut 4:19-20. If one traces אֱלֹהִ֣ים אֲחֵרִ֔ים through Deuteronomy, one discovers Deut 29:23-25 (Eng., 29:24-26), which contains phrases found in Deut 32:8-9, where the nations were allotted by YHWH to the sons of God:

> 24 . . . all the nations will say, 'Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?' 25 Then people will say, 'It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, 26 and went and served other gods ( אֱלֹהִ֣ים אֲחֵרִ֔ים) and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them.

Later in Deut 32:17,[7] these same אלהים are identified as demons.

יִזְבְּח֗וּ לַשֵּׁדִים֙ לֹ֣א אֱלֹ֔הַ אֱלֹהִ֖ים לֹ֣א יְדָע֑וּם חֲדָשִׁים֙ מִקָּרֹ֣ב בָּ֔אוּ לֹ֥א שְׂעָר֖וּם אֲבֹתֵיכֶֽם׃

"They sacrificed to demons—not to God—to gods they had not known,
new ones that had come recently which your fathers had not known about."

Since these other אלהים, the host of heaven and sons of God in Deuteronomy, are described as demons, we cannot deny their reality, at least if we care about getting our beliefs about the spiritual world from the Bible. We also cannot say these other אלהים are mere idols, pieces of wood and stone, since demons are not wood and stone.[8]

---

[6] For a discussion of the Old Testament's "denial phrases" (e.g., "there is none besides me"; "there is none like me") that allegedly disallow the existence of other gods in biblical theology, see "Appendix 2" in the handout that accompanied this paper, or Michael S. Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible," *BBR* 18:1 (2008): 1-30.

[7] On this passage, see M. Heiser. "Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?" Bible Translator 59:3 (July 2008): 137-145.

[8] For the ancient polytheist and the Israelite who lived in the context of polytheistic nations, what we see in Deuteronomy would not constitute a conundrum. While both the entity and the cult object are called a god, it cannot be presumed that ancient people considered a humanly fabricated statue or fetish object to be identical with the god in whose likeness it was fashioned. As one scholar of ancient cult objects notes: "When a non-physical being

### 3.3. The Wider Context of Ancient Canaan (Ugarit, Phoenicia)

The final positive argument that we have a council of divine beings in Psalm 82 concerns the comparative material. As students of the Hebrew Bible know, the discovery of the Ugaritic material in 1929 provided a much more secure context for understanding the Old Testament than Mesopotamia. The discovery effectively brought the era of Pan-Babylonianism to a close. The language of Ugarit proved to be the closest cognate to biblical Hebrew. Its vocabulary provided exact or near exact equivalents to hundreds of words in the Hebrew Bible, many of which were *hapax legomena*. Ugaritic literature also provided explicit parallels to a range of biblical passages. Descriptions of a divine council and its אלהים members were among those parallels, along with exact parallels to names and epithets given to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Suffice it to say that these line-for-line parallels are not contrived. Defending the human view of the אלהים in Yahweh's council would not only require ignoring the context of other psalms and Deuteronomy, but it requires turning a blind eye to psalm's own historical and linguistic context. Those interested in this material can consult the bibliography in the handout.

In summary of the positive arguments, it is misguided to assume that the plural אלהים of Psalm 82 who are being judged for their corrupt governance of the nations are humans. This approach lacks coherence.

---

manifested in a statue, this anchored the being in a controlled location where living human beings could interact with it through ritual performance . . . In order for human beings to interact with deities and to persuade them to create, renew, and maintain the universe, these beings had to be brought down to earth. . . . This interaction had to be strictly controlled in order to avoid both the potential dangers of unrestricted divine power and the pollution of the divine by the impurity of the human world. While the ability of deities to act in the visible, human realm was brought about through their manifestation in a physical body, manifestation in one body did not in any sense restrict a deity, for the non-corporeal essence of a deity was unlimited by time and space, and could manifest in all its "bodies," in all locations, all at one time" (Gay Robins, "Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt," in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East* [ASOR Book Series 10; ed. Neal H. Walls; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005], 1-2). Michael Dick, another scholar who has devoted two decades of attention to the subject of idolatry in Israel and the ancient Near East, agrees. In his scholarly work on the subject, Dick cites a number of texts where the ancient idolater used deity language for the product of his hands, but also made an intellectual distinction between the statue and the deity it represented, or which was thought to take residence in the statue (Michael P. Dick, *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999], 33-34). In one telling citation, the destruction of the statue of Shamash of Sippar was not regarded as the death of Shamash. Indeed, Shamash could still be worshipped.

## 4. Negatively: Why the Human View of the Plural אלהים of Psalm 82 is Without Support

We've already touched on two of the strategies for defending the human identification of the plural אלהים of Psalm 82: the fact that humans are at times called God's sons. This strategy is ineffectual for Psalm 82, especially since Psalm 89 clearly places the council of אלהים in the clouds, not on earth. There are two other attempted strategies used by those who wanted the plural אלהים to be humans.

### 4.1. The Judges of Israel

Perhaps the most familiar argument for the human view of אלהים is the one that insists certain Old Testament passages name the elders of Israel as אלהים judges. Once we look at the passages used for that argument, we'll see that the argument lacks credibility.

Exodus 22:6-8 [Eng., 22:7-9] is an important text in this argument. The translation used here is from the JPS Tanakh:

> 6 When a man gives money or goods to another for safekeeping, and they are stolen from the man's house—if the thief is caught, he shall pay double; 7 if the thief is not caught, the owner of the house shall come near (נקרב) to God (האלהים) that he has not laid hands on the other's property. 8 In all charges of misappropriation—pertaining to an ox, an ass, a sheep, a garment, or any other loss, whereof one party alleges, "This is it"—the case of both parties shall come before God (האלהים): he whom God (אלהים) declares guilty (ירשיען) shall pay double to the other.[9]

Scholars who deny that the plural אלהים in Ps 82:1 are divine beings assume that אלהים and האלהים in Exod 22:6-8 are human beings (the elder-judges of Israel) and take the results of that assumption to argue that Psalm 82 is describing Israelite judges, not gods in a divine council. The plural predicate in Exod 22:8 (ירשיען) allegedly supports this view, for surely the passage speaks of Israel's judges rendering decisions for the people. There are several problems with this use of the passage.

---

[9] *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985). The *Tanakh* translation follows the Hebrew versification.

First, it is worth noting that these judges (if we presume for the moment that האלהים and אלהים are plural and referring to people) are rendering decisions for the nation of Israel – not the nations of the world as is the case in Psalm 82 and Deut 32. This contextual disconnect alone raises suspicions about the merits of the use of the passage. The contextual incongruence aside, the argument here actually depends on whether אלהים and האלהים in verse 8 is to be taken as singular or plural, and whether it in fact refers to human beings.

Behind the assumption that אלהים and האלהים in Exod 22:8 are to be understood as semantically plural human beings is the earlier story in Exodus, where Moses appointed judges at the suggestion of his father-in-law, Jethro. This account is found in Exod 18:13-24. Note the occurrences of אלהים and האלהים carefully:

> 13 The next day, Moses sat as magistrate among the people, while the people stood about Moses from morning until evening. 14 But when Moses' father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" 15 Moses replied to his father-in-law, "It is because the people come to me to inquire of God (אלהים). 16 When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God." 17 But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right; 18 you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. 19 Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God (אלהים) be with you! You represent the people before God (האלהים): you bring the disputes before God (האלהים), 20 and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow. 21 You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and 22 let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves.

> Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you. 23 If you do this—and God so commands you—you will be able to bear up; and all these people too will go home unwearied." 24 Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said.

Taken at face value, there is nothing in Exodus 18 that compels us to understand אלהים or האלהים as semantically plural, something that is essential for the notion that the men appointed in the episode are a convenient explanation for the אלהים and האלהים of both Exod 22:8 and Psa 82. Each occurrence of אלהים or האלהים in this passage can quite readily refer to the singular God of Israel. And the same is true of Exodus 22. There is nothing in either passage that compels a plural translation. A singular translation referring to God himself makes for a clear reading. Without compelling evidence for a plural translation, the argument that the elders of Israel were אלהים judges turns to vapor. But even damaging is the fact that the men appointed by Moses in Exodus 18 are never actually called אלהים or האלהים in the text. This account of the appointment of judges, then, is no support for seeing human אלהים in Psalm 82.

There is one other passage that speaks of אלהים in a context similar to that of Exod 22:8. Exodus 21:2-6 must be brought into the discussion:

> 2 When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. 3 If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. 4 If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. 5 But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' 6 then his master shall bring him to God (האלהים),[10] and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.

[10] The *Tanakh* translation adds a note here: "to the judges."

The interpretation is put forth that the master is commanded to bring the slave before the elder-judges of Israel before piercing his ear, and that these judges are called האלהים. This position appears coherent, but there are obstacles to its lucidity.

First, האלהים could be semantically singular, referring to the God of Israel, as was the case with Exod 18 and Exod 22. The promise about the status of the slave is being made in truth before God. This is the simplest reading. However, there is evidence that the redactor-scribes responsible for the final form of the text did not interpret האלהים as singular—and also did not interpret a plurality as referring to human beings! The key is the parallel passage in Deuteronomy 15. Later redactors apparently saw האלהים as semantically *plural* since the parallel to it found in Deut 15:17 *removes* the word האלהים from the instruction. This omission is inexplicable if the term was taken as singular, referring to YHWH. Why would the God of Israel need to be removed from this text? Moreover, if האלהים had been construed as plural humans, Israel's judges, the deletion is just as puzzling. What harm would there be if the point of the passage was that Israel's judges needed to approve the status of the slave? The excision on the part of the Deuteronomist is quite understandable, though, if האלהים was intended as a semantically plural word that referred to *gods*. Seventy years ago Cyrus Gordon pointed out that the omission in Deuteronomy appears to have been theologically motivated.[11] Gordon argued that האלהים in Exod 21:6 referred to "household gods" like the *teraphim* of other passages. Bringing a slave into one's home in patriarchal culture required the consent and approval of one's ancestors—departed human dead who were אלהים as we saw much earlier was the case in 1 Sam 28:13. Under a later redaction this phrase was omitted in the wake of Israel's struggle with idolatry. Only a plural referring to multiple divine beings can coherently explain the deletion. As a result, this passage is also no support for the plural human אלהים view.

## 4.2. Jesus' Use of Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34

A second strategy for arguing the plural אלהים of Psalm 82 are humans attempts to utilize the quotation of Psalm 82:6 by Jesus in John 10:34. I would suggest that this text has been fundamentally

[11] Cyrus H. Gordon, "אלהים in Its Reputed Meaning of Rulers, Judges," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 (1935): 139-44.

misunderstood by New Testament scholars who approach it with little or no background knowledge of the divine council.

Briefly, the context of Jesus' quotation is crucial. In John 10:30 he has just told his audience that he and the Father were one. Jesus isn't going to follow that statement by essentially saying "I get to call myself God because you mere mortals do it too by virtue of Psalm 82." That approach undermines John's presentation in this chapter of the deity of Jesus, yet this is precisely the trajectory one finds of all the published material on John 10:34 and its use of Psalm 82.

This backdrop is important for interpreting the significance of Jesus' quotation of Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34-35. I have never come across the view I have of this issue in print, and so it seems best to give the full context of Jesus' quotation in order to make my thoughts clear (John 10:22-42):

> 22 And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication, and it was winter. 23 And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon's porch. 24 Then came the Jews round about him, and said to him, "How long are you going to make us doubt? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you believed not: the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me. 26 But you believe not, because you are not of my sheep, as I said to you. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: 28 And I give to them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall anyone pluck them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who gave *them* to me, is greater than all; and no one is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. 30 **I and my Father are one**." 31 Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him. 32 Jesus answered them, "Many good works have I shown you from my Father; for which of those works do you stone me?" 33 The Jews answered him, saying, "For a good work we would not stone you; but for blasphemy; and because that **you, being a man, make yourself God**."

The quotation of Psalm 82:6 follows:

> 34 Jesus answered them, **"Is it not written in your law: <u>'I said, you are gods</u>?' 35 If he [God] called them gods, to whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken; 36 do you say of him whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world, 'You blaspheme!' because I said, I am the Son of God?** 37 If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. 38 But if I do, though you don't believe me, believe the works: that you may know, and **believe, that the Father *is* in me, and I in him**." 39 Therefore they sought again to take him: but he escaped out of their hand, 40 And went away again beyond Jordan into the place where John at first baptized; and there he abode. 41 And many resorted unto him, and said, John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this man were true. 42 And many believed on him there.

Here is what we can glean without interpretive disagreement:

1. Jesus' prefaced his quotation by asserting that he and the Father were one (10:30).
2. This claim was regarded as blasphemy in that Jesus was making himself out *to be God* (10:33).

3. In defense of his assertion, Jesus quoted Psalm 82:6. That is, to establish his claim to be God, Jesus went to Psalm 82:6.
4. He follows the quotation with the statement that the Father was in him, and he was in the Father.

The consensus view of this quotation is that Jesus was endorsing the human אלהים view and thereby arguing, “I have every right to call myself divine—you guys can do it as well on the basis of Psalm 82:6.” The problem, of course, is that this amounts to Jesus saying “you mere mortals can call yourself gods, so I can, too.” If this is what John intends to communicate to go along with verse 30 to put forth the idea of Jesus’ deity, it’s an inept strategy.

I propose that Jesus knew the אלהים of Psalm 82 were not human, and that Jesus was in fact asserting his *own* unique ontological oneness with the Father.[12] The human אלהים view derives from two assumptions brought to the text: (1) that it is required by the assumed impossibility of there being other אלהים because of Judeo-Christian monotheism; and (2) that the phrase "to whom the word of God came" refers to the Jews who received the law at Sinai (i.e., the Pharisees' forefathers). This paper has already dispensed with the first assumption, so we’ll move to the latter.

I would suggest that what first needs to be done is to come to terms with what is meant by “the word of God” and who it is that receives that word in Psalm 82:6-7:

> I said, ‘You are gods (אלהים), even sons of the Most High (בני עליון), all of you;
>
> nevertheless, like humans you will die, and fall like any prince.’

The speaker (“I”) in the passage is the God of Israel, the God who is standing in the council in 82:1 among the אלהים. God announces that the אלהים of the council are his sons, but because of their

[12] The notion that John 10:33 has Jesus only claiming to be *a* god (*a la* Mormon or Jehovah’s Witness theology) is not tenable. A syntactical search of the Greek New Testament, however, reveals that the identical construction found in John 10:33 occurs elsewhere in contexts referring specifically to God the Father. The search is accomplished via the OpenText.org syntactically-tagged Greek New Testament database in the Libronix platform developed by Logos Bible Software. The search query asks for all clauses where the predicator of the clause can be any finite verb except εἰμί where the subject complement is the lexeme θεός with no definite article present. Any clause component can intervene between these two elements. Other than John 10:33, the following hits are yielded by the query: Acts 5:29; Gal. 4:8, 9; 1 Thess. 1:9; 4:1; 2 Thess. 1:8; Titus 3:8; Heb. 9:14. It is incoherent within the immediate and broader context of the book in which each passage hit occurs to translate θεός as “a god.”

corruption (vv. 2-5), they will lose their immortality. I believe that Jesus was referring *to this utterance itself* when he quoted the psalm, *not the Jewish nation receiving the law at Sinai or the revelation that would become the Old Testament*. To illustrate the difference in the views:

| Common Interpretation / Jesus' strategy assumes אלהים are human | My view / Jesus' strategy assumes אלהים are divine |
|---|---|
| The "word of God that came" = revelation from God at Sinai, or the entire OT | The "word of God that came" = the utterance itself in Psalm 82:6 – the pronouncement from God |
| "to whom the word of God came" = the Jews at Sinai, or the Jews generally | "to whom the word of God came" = the אלהים of the divine council in 82:1 |
| Result = the Jews are the "sons of the Most High" and אלהים -- so Jesus can call himself an אלהים as well, since he's a Jew, too. | Result = The Jews are not אלהים, and Jesus reminds his enemies that their Scriptures say there are other אלהים who are divine sons—and this on the heels of declaring himself one with the Father (John 10:30) puts him in the position of not only claiming divinity as a son of the Most High, but by claiming to be above the sons of God since he is one with the Father. |

Nowhere in Psalm 82 do we have any hint of the Mosaic Law, Sinai, a Jewish nation, or the canonical revelation given to the Jews. Every element in the commonly held view must be inserted into the passage. My view is that Jesus is quoting Psalm 82:6 to put forth the idea that he was more than human. He reminds his Jewish audience that there were in fact other אלהים besides the God of Israel, and those אלהים were God's sons. Because he calls himself the son of God and has in fact just claimed to be one with Yahweh, not only puts himself in the class of the sons of the Most High of Psalm 82:6—divine אלהים—but implies that he is Lord of the council. This particular son of the Most High is one with the Father. The Jewish authorities got the message, too—they charged him with blasphemy. Now ask yourself, why would they do that if all Jesus was saying was "you mortal Jews get to call yourselves sons of God, and אלהים, so I can, too." That makes no sense at all.

## CONCLUSION

The net result of this investigation is that, to hold the view that the plural אלהים of Psalm 82 are humans requires ignoring some very clear items:

(1) that five figures are called אלהים in the Hebrew Bible, which means the word cannot speak to one set of attributes;

(2) that Psalm 82 and Deut 32 have a council of divine beings in the clouds and set over the disinherited nations by Yahweh—authority that no text in the Old Testament assigns to human Israelite judges;

(3) that the אלהים cannot be merely idols, since demons are called and are real;

(4) that explicit ancient Canaanite parallels for a divine council of plural spirit beings exist;

(5) that there are no texts in the Hebrew Bible that call Israel's judges אלהים;

(6) that Jesus' use of Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34 is only a defense of his deity when the אלהים of Psalm 82 are presumed to be divine beings.

Let's allow the text say what it says; we have no reason to fear it.